

The Gospel of Matthew, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 3: John the Baptist and the Baptism of Jesus

Matthew 3:1-17

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, Matthew 3 carries enormous weight in a short space. It introduces the kingdom of heaven that John says is “at hand,” the reign of God that is about to break in through Christ. It defines biblical repentance, not as mere regret but as a turning of the whole life that bears fruit. And it gives us one of the clearest glimpses in all of Scripture of the triune nature of God, with the Father speaking, the Son being baptized, and the Spirit descending, all in a single scene. This is also the natural place to help your class think carefully about baptism, distinguishing John’s preparatory baptism of repentance from the baptism into Christ for the forgiveness of sins that the apostles would later preach (Acts 2:38; Acts 19:1-5; Romans 6:3-4). Handle that distinction clearly but simply, letting Scripture lead, so your students leave with a firmer grip on what baptism means and why it matters.

At the same time, this chapter is deeply formational. John’s relentless call to repentance is aimed straight at the comfortable, religious heart that wants the benefits of God’s kingdom without the turning that admits entrance. Jesus’ humble submission to baptism, the sinless One stepping into the water for sinners, models the obedience and lowliness God means to work in us. And the Father’s declaration of delight in His beloved Son, spoken before Jesus had accomplished anything publicly, speaks tenderly to every student who is exhausted from trying to earn approval. The lesson aims to expose our false confidences and our performance-driven hearts, and to settle us into the secure love of God.

So teach for both. Help your students see clearly what the text reveals about the kingdom, repentance, baptism, and the triune God. Then let those truths search their hearts, calling them to honest repentance, humble obedience, and rest in the Father’s love, so that they leave changed and not merely informed.

Question 1

Student Question:

John’s first recorded words are “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (3:2), and he describes a “baptism of repentance.” What does the Bible mean by repentance, and why is it so central to preparing for the arrival of God’s kingdom?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin by recovering what repentance actually means, because the word has been worn smooth by misuse. The Greek word behind it, *metanoia*, means a change of mind that turns into a

change of direction. It is not merely feeling sorry, and it is not merely turning over a new leaf by willpower. It is a deep reorientation of the whole person away from sin and back toward God.

Connect repentance to the kingdom. John says, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (3:2). The reign of God is breaking into the world in Christ, and the only way to enter a kingdom is to change allegiance. Repentance is how a rebel becomes a subject of the King. You cannot welcome the reign of God while clinging to your own rule. That is why repentance is the doorway, not an optional extra.

Help your class feel why this is the part we most want to skip. Repentance costs us something; it requires admitting we were wrong and surrendering control. It is far more comfortable to add a little religion to an unchanged life than to let God overturn it. John will have none of that, and neither will the gospel.

Set this up as a thread that runs through the whole New Testament plan of salvation. When the church began, Peter’s answer to convicted hearts was “Repent and be baptized” (Acts 2:38). Repentance is not John’s eccentric emphasis; it is the consistent call of God to everyone who would come to Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Repentance as a genuine turning of the whole life from sin to God, not mere regret (Acts 26:20)
- The kingdom of heaven as the reign of God breaking in through Christ (Matthew 3:2; 4:17)
- Repentance as the necessary doorway into the kingdom, a change of allegiance to the King
- Repentance as a consistent part of God’s call throughout the New Testament (Luke 13:3; Acts 2:38; Acts 17:30)
- The cost of repentance: surrendering self-rule to God

Discussion Prompts

- How is biblical repentance different from simply feeling sorry or trying harder?
- Why is repentance the part of coming to God that we are most tempted to skip?
- Where in your life is God currently calling you to change direction?

Question 2

Student Question:

John warned the crowds to “bear fruit in keeping with repentance” (3:8). Where in your life is your talk of change running ahead of any visible fruit, and what would real, fruit-bearing repentance look like there this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the first self-examining question, and the goal is honest reflection rather than information. John's demand is concrete: "bear fruit in keeping with repentance" (3:8). He refuses to accept the appearance of repentance with no harvest behind it. Words of change are cheap; fruit is the proof.

Help students grasp the picture. A tree does not announce that it has changed; it simply produces apples or it does not. John is saying that real repentance always shows up in changed living, in restored relationships, in honesty, in generosity, in dropped sins and new obedience. When Luke records this scene, the crowds ask, "What then shall we do?" and John gives them painfully practical answers about sharing, honesty, and contentment (Luke 3:10–14).

Press for honesty about the gap. Most of us have an area where our talk of change has run far ahead of any actual fruit. We have said sorry for the same sin many times with no real turning. We have claimed to forgive while still nursing the grudge. We have intended generosity that never reaches our wallet. Invite students to name, at least privately, where the fruit is missing.

Then move toward concrete, fruit-bearing action. Ask each student to name one specific fruit that genuine repentance would produce in them this week. Repentance that never touches Tuesday is not yet repentance.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Fruit as the evidence of genuine repentance (Matthew 3:8; 7:16–20)
- The difference between the appearance of change and real transformation
- Practical, concrete obedience as the mark of a repentant heart (Luke 3:10–14)
- The danger of repeated words of repentance with no actual turning

Discussion Prompts

- Where has your talk of change outrun any visible fruit in your life?
- What specific fruit would genuine repentance produce in you this week?
- Who could help hold you accountable for the change you say you want?

Question 3

Student Question:

When the Pharisees and Sadducees came, John refused to let them rest on their ancestry: "do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father'" (3:9). What false confidences do people lean on instead of genuine repentance and obedience to God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Focus on John's blunt warning to the Pharisees and Sadducees. They came to the Jordan, perhaps to keep up appearances, and John refused to let them hide behind their heritage: "do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able

from these stones to raise up children for Abraham” (3:9). Their ancestry could not save them. Only repentance could.

Help students identify the modern equivalents of “we have Abraham as our father.” People lean on all sorts of false confidences instead of genuine repentance: being raised in a Christian home, having been baptized long ago, attending services regularly, being a generally good and moral person, or comparing themselves favorably to others. None of these is a substitute for a heart turned toward God and walking in obedience.

Make this searching but not crushing. The danger of false confidence is that it feels like faith while leaving the heart unchanged. A person can have an impeccable religious résumé and be far from God. John’s axe is already “laid to the root of the trees” (3:10), and what matters is whether there is real fruit, not an impressive family tree.

Point your class to the only sure ground. Our confidence is not in our pedigree, our past, or our performance, but in Christ and in a living, obedient faith in Him. Help students trade every false confidence for that one true foundation.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The insufficiency of heritage, religious background, or reputation to save (Matthew 3:9)
- False confidences that substitute for genuine repentance and faith
- The necessity of personal repentance and obedience, not inherited or assumed standing
- Christ alone as the true ground of the believer’s confidence (Galatians 2:16)
- God judging by the fruit of a life, not by appearances (Matthew 3:10)

Discussion Prompts

- What false confidences are you tempted to lean on instead of genuine repentance?
- Why is it so easy for religious background to feel like saving faith when it is not?
- Where is your true confidence before God actually resting today?

Question 4

Student Question:

John lived a startlingly simple, single-minded life in the wilderness, wholly devoted to his mission (3:1, 4). Where has comfort, clutter, or distraction crowded out the kind of focused devotion to God that John displayed, and what might you need to let go of?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Look closely at John’s life before applying it. He lived in the wilderness, wore camel’s hair, and ate locusts and wild honey (3:1, 4). This is not asceticism for its own sake; it is the portrait of a man so consumed by his mission that he stripped away everything that did not serve it. John was single-minded, undistracted, wholly given to preparing the way of the Lord.

Contrast that with the cluttered, distracted lives most of us lead. We are not called to live in a desert, but we are called to a focused devotion that John makes us envy. Our attention is splintered across a hundred screens and pursuits, and the quiet, sustained attention that knowing God requires gets crowded out by noise and comfort.

Help students name their particular clutter. For one it is the endless scroll of a phone; for another it is overcommitment, possessions that demand maintenance, or entertainment that fills every empty moment. Ask what specifically is crowding out time with God, prayer, and the Scriptures.

Then call for a concrete simplification. John's freedom came from having less, not more. Encourage each student to name one thing they will set aside this week to make room for focused devotion to God. The aim is not legalistic deprivation but freedom for what matters most.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Single-minded devotion to God as a worthy pattern (Matthew 6:33; Luke 10:41–42)
- The danger of distraction and clutter crowding out our walk with God
- Simplicity and self-denial in the service of a higher calling (Hebrews 12:1)
- Focused attention as essential to knowing and serving God

Discussion Prompts

- What clutter or distraction is most crowding out your devotion to God?
- What is one thing you could set aside this week to make room for Him?
- What does John's single-mindedness stir up that your divided heart needs?

Question 5

Student Question:

Jesus was sinless, yet He insisted on being baptized "to fulfill all righteousness" (3:15). Since His baptism was not for His own forgiveness, what was it for, and what does His example teach us about humbly submitting to the will of God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Take time with the puzzle that stunned even John. Jesus, the sinless Son of God, comes to be baptized with a baptism of repentance, and John protests: "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (3:14). John is right that Jesus has no sins to repent of. So why does Jesus insist?

Let Jesus' own answer lead: "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness" (3:15). Jesus is not confessing sin; He is identifying with sinners. He steps into the water alongside the very people He came to save, beginning His ministry by taking His place with

us. The One who would later bear our sins on the cross begins by standing in line with us at the river.

Draw out the humility on display. The eternal Son submits to baptism at the hands of His own messenger. He does not stand apart; He stoops down. This is the same humility Paul describes in Philippians 2, the One who was in the form of God taking the form of a servant. Jesus' whole life is marked by this downward movement of love.

Then make it personal. Jesus models a humble, glad submission to the will of God even when it costs Him and even when He could rightly claim exemption. The application for your students is to ask where pride or a sense of being above some humble obedience is keeping them from doing what is fitting in the eyes of God. If the sinless Son submitted, who are we to hold back?

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The sinlessness of Christ, who had no need to repent (Hebrews 4:15; 2 Corinthians 5:21)
- Jesus identifying with sinners and taking His place alongside us (Isaiah 53:12)
- Jesus' baptism as fulfilling all righteousness and inaugurating His ministry (Matthew 3:15)
- The humility of Christ as the pattern for our own obedience (Philippians 2:5–8)
- Glad submission to the will of God even when it is costly or humbling

Discussion Prompts

- Why is it significant that the sinless Jesus chose to be baptized?
- What does Jesus' humility at the Jordan reveal about His heart toward us?
- Where is pride keeping you from a humble act of obedience God is asking of you?

Question 6

Student Question:

John was content to decrease so that Jesus could increase, pointing away from himself to “he who is coming after me,” whose sandals he was not worthy to carry (3:11). Where is God calling you to step out of the spotlight and point people to Christ rather than to yourself?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John the Baptist is one of Scripture's clearest models of pointing away from self. Though crowds flocked to him and he could have built a following, he relentlessly directed attention to Another: “he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry” (3:11). In John's Gospel he sums up his whole philosophy: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30).

Help students feel how rare and beautiful this is. John had every earthly reason to make the moment about himself. Instead he treated his own prominence as scaffolding to be taken down

once the building, Christ, was revealed. His greatness lay precisely in his willingness to become smaller so that Jesus would be seen.

Press the question into ordinary life. Most of us quietly want the credit, the recognition, the spotlight. We serve, but we want to be noticed serving. We help, but we want it known. John challenges that instinct. Ask students where they are tempted to point people to themselves, their gifts, or their goodness, rather than to Christ.

Encourage a concrete shift. Pointing to Jesus rather than ourselves might mean serving without announcing it, giving God the credit for a success, deflecting praise toward Christ, or stepping back so someone else can grow. Invite each student to name one place this week where they will choose to decrease so Jesus can increase.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Humility that points people to Christ rather than self (John 3:30)
- Christ's supremacy over even the greatest of His servants (Matthew 3:11; 11:11)
- Serving for God's glory rather than human recognition (Matthew 6:1–4)
- True greatness found in making Christ greater, not ourselves

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you tempted to point people to yourself rather than to Christ?
- What would it look like to decrease this week so that Jesus increases?
- How do you handle it when your service or goodness goes unnoticed?

Question 7

Student Question:

At Jesus' baptism the Father speaks from heaven, the Son comes up from the water, and the Spirit descends like a dove (3:16–17). What does this scene reveal to us about the nature of the God we worship, and why does it matter for our salvation?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question opens onto one of the richest scenes in Scripture. As Jesus comes up from the water, “the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased’” (3:16–17). In one moment we behold the Father speaking, the Son being baptized, and the Spirit descending.

Use this carefully to help your class glimpse the nature of God. The one true God exists eternally as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They are not three gods, nor merely three roles one person plays, for here all three are present and distinct at once: the Father speaks, the Son stands in the

water, the Spirit descends. Scripture holds together the oneness of God (Deuteronomy 6:4) with the reality that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are each fully God.

Keep the tone one of worship rather than mere definition. This is a mystery to marvel at, not a puzzle to master. The God who made the heavens has revealed Himself, and at the threshold of our salvation we are given a glimpse of the fullness of His being, all of Him engaged in the work of rescuing us.

Then show why it matters for salvation. Our salvation is the work of the whole Godhead: the Father who sends and loves, the Son who obeys and saves, the Spirit who anoints and empowers. We are baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). The God who saves us is the God revealed at the Jordan, and to know Him is eternal life.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The oneness of God together with the distinct persons of Father, Son, and Spirit (Deuteronomy 6:4; Matthew 28:19)
- The full deity of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, revealed at the baptism (Matthew 3:16–17)
- The Father, Son, and Spirit together in the work of salvation
- The reverent posture of worship before the revealed nature of God
- Baptism into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19)

Discussion Prompts

- What strikes you most about seeing the Father, Son, and Spirit together at the Jordan?
- Why does it matter for your salvation that the whole Godhead is at work to save you?
- How might marveling at who God is change the way you worship Him?

Question 8

Student Question:

The Father declared over Jesus, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (3:17), before Jesus had preached a single sermon or worked a single miracle. How does the Father’s delight in His Son speak to the way you seek approval and identity, and where do you most need to rest in His love rather than earn it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Notice the timing of the Father’s words. “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (3:17) is spoken before Jesus has preached a sermon, healed a single person, or gone to the cross. The Father’s delight in His Son rests on who the Son is, not yet on any public achievement. The love comes first; the ministry flows from it.

This is profoundly good news for performance-weary hearts, and most of your class will have one. We are trained from childhood to earn approval, to prove our worth, to secure love by accomplishment. Many believers unconsciously relate to God this way too, working anxiously to earn a delight that, in Christ, is already theirs as His children.

Help students see the gospel reordering here. For those who are in Christ, God's love is not the prize at the finish line of our striving; it is the secure ground from which we run. We do not obey in order to be loved; we obey because we are loved. The Father's voice over Jesus becomes, in Christ, the Father's heart toward all His children (Romans 8:14–17).

Press the application gently. Ask where students are still trying to earn what they cannot earn, an approval, an identity, a sense of being enough. Then call them to rest. The same Father who delighted in His Son delights in those He has adopted in Christ. Let that settle into the anxious, striving places of the heart.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Father's love grounded in relationship, not performance (Matthew 3:17)
- Our adoption as children of God in Christ (Romans 8:14–17; Galatians 4:4–7)
- Obedience flowing from love received, not as a means to earn love
- Rest and security found in the Father's love rather than in achievement
- The danger of performance-driven, approval-seeking religion

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you still trying to earn an approval that God already gives His children in Christ?
- How would resting in the Father's love change the way you serve and obey?
- What would it mean to hear the Father's delight spoken over you as His child?

Question 9

Student Question:

John preached a baptism of repentance, yet the New Testament later presents baptism into Christ for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38; Acts 19:1–5; Romans 6:3–4). How do John's baptism and Christian baptism relate, what changed, and what does the Bible teach about the place of baptism in coming to Christ today?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal question of the lesson, and your class will benefit greatly from clear, simple teaching, so take your time without overcomplicating it. The key is to let the New Testament itself trace the line from John's baptism to Christian baptism. John preached "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4), but his baptism was preparatory, pointing forward to the One who was coming. John himself said, "I baptize you with water for

repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I,” and that this Coming One would baptize them with the Holy Spirit (3:11).

Show the clearest evidence that something changed. In Acts 19, Paul meets about twelve disciples in Ephesus who had received only John’s baptism. He explains that John’s baptism pointed people forward to Jesus, and then, Luke tells us, “on hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 19:1–5). These sincere men were baptized again, now into Christ. John’s baptism was real and right for its time, but it was not yet baptism into the crucified and risen Lord. Once Christ had died and risen and the church had begun, baptism took on its full New Testament meaning.

Lay out what that full meaning is, letting Scripture lead and keeping it simple. On the day the church began, Peter told convicted hearers, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). Paul writes that in baptism we are buried with Christ into His death and raised to walk in newness of life (Romans 6:3–4), and that we are baptized into Christ and clothed with Him (Galatians 3:26–27). Jesus Himself said, “whoever believes and is baptized will be saved” (Mark 16:16). Baptism is by immersion, the burial and rising the word itself pictures, and it is for the forgiveness of sins, the appointed place where a penitent believer is united with Christ.

Guard against two errors as you teach. First, this is not salvation by an empty ritual or by mere works that earn merit; baptism is meaningful only as the response of a believing, repentant heart to the gospel of grace, the moment we trust and obey the Lord who saves us. Second, do not separate baptism from believing, as if a person could come to Christ by “faith only” apart from this obedience; the New Testament never pulls them apart. We are saved by grace through a faith that obeys, and baptism is where that faith takes hold of the promise of forgiveness in Christ.

Close in wonder, not in argument. The astonishing thing is not the mechanics of water but the grace it carries: that the risen Christ would meet a sinner there, wash away their sins, clothe them in Himself, and raise them to new life. Help your class marvel that God has given us so tangible a place to lay hold of His mercy, and let any who have not yet obeyed the gospel feel its gentle, urgent invitation.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- John’s baptism as a preparatory baptism of repentance, pointing forward to Christ (Mark 1:4; Matthew 3:11)
- The shift from John’s baptism to baptism into Christ, seen clearly in Acts 19:1–5
- Baptism for the forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38)
- Baptism by immersion as burial and resurrection with Christ into newness of life (Romans 6:3–4)
- Baptism into Christ, clothing the believer with Him (Galatians 3:26–27; Mark 16:16)

- Baptism as the response of a believing, repentant heart to the gospel of grace, not an empty ritual or a meritorious work
- Salvation by grace through an obedient faith, never by faith only apart from obedience

Discussion Prompts

- What changed between John's baptism and the baptism the apostles preached after Pentecost?
- Why does the New Testament so consistently connect baptism with coming to Christ for forgiveness?
- How does seeing baptism as grasping God's grace, rather than earning it, shape the way you view it?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole chapter: John's call to repent, Jesus' humble obedience, the voice of the Father. Name one specific way God is calling you to repent, to humble yourself, or to rest in His love as His child this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Use this capstone to gather the whole chapter and turn it toward the heart. Matthew 3 has given us John's urgent call to repent, the Pharisees' false confidence, Jesus' humble submission, the glimpse of the triune God, and the Father's declaration of love. The aim now is not more information but a single, honest yes.

Encourage specificity, because vague resolutions fade by Tuesday. A real answer might sound like: "I will truly repent of the sin I keep excusing and bear the fruit of confessing it and making it right," or "I will humble myself and obey God in the thing I have been too proud to do," or "I will stop striving to earn God's approval and rest as His beloved child." Help each person find their one thing.

Let the question land personally. You might give a moment of silence for each student to write one sentence before sharing. The goal is that no one leaves having merely studied John and the Jordan; each should leave having said yes to the God revealed there.

Close in worship, not only in resolve. The wonder of Matthew 3 is that the triune God came to the water for us, the Son standing in our place, the Father delighting, the Spirit descending. Lead your class to marvel, and let repentance, humility, and rest in His love all flow from that wonder.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The integration of doctrine and daily transformation
- Repentance, humility, and rest in God's love as fruits of genuine encounter with Him

- Specific, concrete obedience as the response to truth
- Worship and gratitude as the proper motive for Christian obedience

Discussion Prompts

- What is the one truth from Matthew 3 that God most wants to work into your heart?
- What specific step will you take this week, whether to repent, to humble yourself, or to rest in His love?
- How can this class pray for you as you take that step?